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Catholicism at a Crossroads : Jean Sullivan's Message for Post - Catholic Ireland

Eamon Maher

Technological University Dublin, eamon.maher@tudublin.ie

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Contemporary Catholicism in Ireland *A Critical Appraisal*

John Littleton and
Eamon Maher
editors



*Catholicism at a Crossroads:
Jean Sullivan's Message for post-Catholic Ireland*

Eamon Maher

Jean Sullivan (1913-1980) is not a name that triggers automatic recognition among literary cognoscenti in France or in Ireland. 'Sullivan' is the nom de plume adopted by the Breton priest, Joseph Lemarchand, who published his first book in 1958, when he was 45 years old. Between that and his death in 1980, he produced about one publication a year, mostly fiction (novels and short stories), but also a significant spiritual journal, *Morning Light*, and a memoir recounting his youth on a Breton farm and his close relationship with his mother, *Anticipate Every Goodbye*, which I translated into English and to which I will return later. In this chapter, I will illustrate the way in which Sullivan's prophetic voice transcends boundaries, geographical and temporal, and resonates in a special way in what many commentators refer to as post-Catholic Ireland.

In order to situate Sullivan's writings a little better, it is necessary to travel back to the France of the middle of the last century. The Second World War had been a major source of embarrassment to a nation that prided itself on its military prowess and long colonial history. The total capitulation to the invading German army, the collaboration of many French people with the occupying forces' relentless pursuit and extermination of the Jewish population, left France feeling vulnerable and uncertain in the wake of its liberation in 1945. In such a climate, it is not surprising that existentialism became the dominant philosophical and literary trend at this time. Issues of social responsibility came to the fore as people began to ask questions like: How does one find meaning in existence when one no longer believes in God? What is the best way to live a life that will both improve society and fulfil one's moral obligation towards the common good? The human psyche appeared absurd, incomprehensible

to a number of intellectuals. Camus, in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, put forward the theory that the only serious moral issue that people had to face was the decision whether to commit suicide or prolong a life bereft of meaning.

In literature, there was the emergence of the New Novel, with its fragmented style and absence of organic development of character, and the waning of the Catholic Novel, which had enjoyed such a glorious period at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries with talented practitioners such as Bloy, Barbey d'Aureville, Mauriac and Bernanos. When Sullivan began writing, he was hailed as a successor to Bernanos, with whom he shares a prophetic vision. However, in a move that was to characterise his future literary development, he chose a different path. He knew that the spiritual climate of the nineteen fifties in France demanded a fresh approach from a writer like him:

But whether it is that genius cannot be imitated, because former cultural and religious signs have become outdated, they can only communicate with a public living in the past. Spiritual heirs are either out of touch or else forced to renew themselves and follow a new direction, or else return to silence.¹

He was clearly seeking something different, to devise a new way of presenting aspects of religious experience. After winning the *Grand Prix catholique de littérature* for his novel *The Sea Remains*, in 1964, he deliberately distanced himself from both the Catholic Novel and traditional literature in general. The Catholic Novel still had a considerable audience in France at this time. However, in Sullivan's estimation it made no sense to attempt to prolong this genre of writing when its era had passed. He wrote, once more in *Petite littérature individuelle*: 'It is in invention that the future of Christian writers lies if they want to be something more than specialists, scribes or efficient instruments in the market of religion.'² What he conceived or invented was a strange type of conversational style in which the author intervened regularly to address challenges to his readers like the fol-

1. Jean Sullivan, *Petite littérature individuelle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), p 142. My translation.

2. *Ibid.*, p 131. My translation.

lowing from what is perhaps his most disjointed book, *Joie errante* (*Wandering Joy*):

Your anxiety moves me. All these comings-and-goings in space and time [...] You would like an accomplished book that would grab you by the throat! I don't want to lie to this extent. Why should I allow myself to be carried along by the mechanics of a plot? [...] Why should I extend for you this trap, while I'd hide behind the smooth rampart of literature, totally unblemished, watching you look at yourselves, delighted with my posturing.³

In lines like these, Sullivan questions all the usual features associated with the novel genre: plot, classical style and linear character development. But he is also debunking the tools of his trade by telling his readers that he refuses to 'hide behind the smooth rampart of literature', or to maintain a pretence in relation to a literary process that he considers outdated and ineffectual. In his later novels, in particular, Sullivan writes more and more of social marginalisation through the experience of his characters, many of whom live in liminal spaces, often as tramps. He never experienced marginalisation first hand, but his characters frequently dispense with the veneer of social respectability, and this affords them a keener vision of what is really important in the development of a strong inner life. He reveals the transformation that can take hold of people who are suddenly deprived of material and physical comforts and experience all that is synonymous with living as a down-and-out in any large city. They remain for the most part unseen and ignored by those who go about their daily routine without a thought for how people on the margins are faring. Sullivan believed that material impoverishment could be a gateway to happiness, a liberation. Hence his declaration in *Morning Light*:

From the start I feel close to all those whom society has marginalised – tramps, addicts, freaks, even 'establishment' types, empty of spiritual substance and beginning to realise it. They live in the midst of steel, glass high-rises, highways

3. Jean, Sullivan, *Joie errante* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), p 147. My translation.

that have become cemeteries, sex shops, and the rubble of human failure. But at the same time I notice with amazement that a song of freedom flows through everything, a paradoxical joy more powerful than my pain and mediocrity, the hope which those who bear it within them say they recognise.⁴

At the time he was writing these lines (the 1970s), the old Catholic order in France was giving way to a new, underground religion. Young people in particular were disenchanted and dissatisfied with the Church's teachings and were choosing to live in marginal communities where they believed a more fulfilling spiritual life could be realised. Sullivan is thus very much a writer of his time, a time of questioning of, and revolt against, traditional values. It is significant that many of his agnostic and atheistic characters are more sympathetic and possess more genuinely Christian qualities than those who claim membership of the Church. In fact, there is a sense in which Sullivan was dismissive of many aspects of organised religion:

In itself religion is conservative; it emphasises the fear of death, protection against evil, and a taste for the miraculous as an escape from reality. The gospel, in contrast, implies constant revolution, rousing those who hear it from the sleep of fable and magic, as well as from any political absolute. (*Morning Light*, p 65).

His commitment to the Gospel, with its calls for uprooting and rebirth, and the accompanying distrust of certain aspects of the institutional Church – particularly all the remnants of dogmatic, repressive religious teaching – may well have been at the root of Sullivan's literary vocation. He saw himself as prolonging the *Logos*, or the Word, whose mysterious breath can transform lives, whose enigmatic quality forces readers to come up with their own answers, to question their belief system and to take risks in their personal lives. Sullivan believed that inner conversion was the path to self-fulfilment and that this conversion was often only possible when one detached oneself from the centre of society, with its emphasis on the accumulation of material

3. Jean Sullivan, *Morning Light: The Spiritual Journal of Jean Sullivan*, trs Joseph Cunneen and Patrick Gormally (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), p 100.

goods and instant gratification, things that were often achieved at the expense of spiritual contentment. As a writer, he decided to steer clear of the path that would lead to celebrity and high book sales and to concentrate on reaching the small band of readers who were open to his particular brand of writing, those who were not put off by the chaotic nature of the style or by the provocation contained therein. We read in *Miroir brisé*: 'It is possible that the music of my books is not made for you. One comes across numerous and diverse melodies in books that are only suited to the small number capable of responding to their call.'⁵ Sullivan wanted at all costs to avoid falling into the trap of edification and self-congratulation. He mused about the future of Christian writing in *Anticipate Every Goodbye*:

Where are the prophets, I ask myself? In truth, literature has become a career for many writers. There is an obvious contradiction between pursuing a career and living out the paradoxes of the gospel. I keep on waiting to hear a breath, a voice of rebellion. Instead all we're treated to is writers playing around with political or moral ideas and telling us about their pious aspirations. All I hear are well-rounded, balanced truths that will not upset the apple cart.⁶

When reading pronouncements like this, one must ask oneself why there have been so few of the prophetic figures of whom Sullivan speaks in Ireland. After all, it is not as if we live any more on an island cocooned from the inroads of modernity. We have had our period of disenchantment with organised religion, to the extent that the Church of Ireland bishop, Richard Clarke, in a book of essays on what he refers to as 'post-Catholic Ireland', feels justified in suggesting that 'the Irish Church is now discredited and moribund in the eyes of many detached onlookers'. Clarke senses that the revelations of child sexual abuse involving Catholic clergy, while causing a massive loss of confidence in the institution, were not in themselves anything like the full reason for the current crisis within Irish Catholicism. They provided ammunition to those who had harboured a

5. Jean Sullivan, *Miroir brisé* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), p 51. My translation.

6. *Anticipate Every Goodbye*, trs Eamon Maher (Dublin: Veritas, 2000), p 82.

grievance against the powerful institution and an opportunity to gain some long-awaited revenge. The major issue for many people in relation to child sexual abuse, in my view, was the reluctance within the leadership of the Church to risk the reputation of the institution by dealing in an adequate manner with those few who had disgraced their calling. Clarke notes: 'Yet, had all been well in every other aspect of the life of all the Christian traditions, this loss of reputation might have been overcome. But much else was going awry.'⁷

Ever since Vatican II, increased access to education, the appearance of televisions in most Irish homes, foreign travel and, finally, the phenomenal prosperity heralded by the Celtic Tiger, led to people questioning in a much more stringent manner the basis of their faith. They were no longer prepared to be dictated to as they had been in the past. Slowly, but inexorably, the once unstinting dedication and commitment to the Church began to falter. To such an extent that the favourite Sunday activity among Irish people is more likely to be a visit to a shopping centre than a Church. Tom Inglis, in his book *Global Ireland*, captures the transformation very well:

What was crucial during the second half of the twentieth century was how, for some people, that sense of difference moved from a predominantly Catholic culture to one of commodity capitalism. Instead of realising ourselves through the language of the Church and its teachings and practices, we gradually switched to realising ourselves through the language of the market and its teachings and practices.⁸

The result of this, in Inglis's view, is the shift among Irish people from 'Catholic to consumer capitalism', from 'a culture of self-denial and self-surrender to one of self-realisation and self-indulgence.' (*Global Ireland*, p 33) In previous times, many of our writers, who suffered at the hands of a repressive Censorship Board that was viewed as being dominated by the Church even though its members were lay people, felt estranged

7. Richard Clarke, *A Whisper of God: Essays on post-Catholic Ireland and the Christian Future* (Dublin: The Columba Press, 2006), p 27.

8. Tom Inglis, *Global Ireland: Same Difference* (London: Routledge, 2007), p 30.

from the dominant religion. As Colum Kenny notes:

'Throughout the decades following independence, the new state certainly had among its citizens vibrant artists and interesting writers. However, a stifling blend of nationalism and conservative Catholicism made it increasingly difficult for many to express themselves freely or to work in ways that they believed to be moral and necessary.'⁹

John McGahern, someone who was extremely attached to the rhythms and rituals of the Catholicism of his youth, came to resent the intrusions made by priests and religious into the sexual lives of people. Many couples got married without any sexual knowledge, or indeed without any knowledge of the person they were marrying. Contraceptives were not available, and it was sinful to use them in any case. As a result, a large number of children came into the world, often more than could be adequately catered for in terms of food and clothing. The hold of the Church over the people was draconian: 'The ideal of society was the celibate priest. The single state was thus elevated. The love of God was greater than the love of man or woman; the sexual was seen as sin-infected and unclean.'¹⁰

Given this stifling and repressive attitude to sexuality, it is in some ways logical that Irish people, many of whom jettisoned their religion when it was no longer of social or political advantage to them, were very happy to welcome the dawning of a new, liberal, economically prosperous, secular society in the 1990s. However, the recently appointed Cardinal Seán Brady, in a speech delivered at Knock, a place where the most significant Irish Marian shrine is located, on 17 August 2007, warned of the dangers of the new 'Ireland of stocks and shares'. He remarked: 'The truth is that many of those who claim to have set Ireland free from the shackles of religious faith in recent years are now silent in the face of the real captivities of the 'new' Ireland.'¹¹ The Cardinal went on to declare that there were signs that the secular

9. Colum Kenny, *Moments That Changed Us* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 2005), p 229.

10. John McGahern, *Memoir* (London: Faber&Faber, 2005), pp 51-2.

11. Cited in Patsy McGarry, 'Back with a Belt of the Crozier', in *The Irish Times* (Weekend Review), 25 August, 2007.

project in Ireland did not bring happiness, mainly because of its failure to address the really important questions of people's lives. It is actually difficult to ascertain whether or not our newly found prosperity has had an overall positive or negative effect. For those arguing the latter case, there is the evidence of increased addiction to alcohol and drugs like cocaine and heroin, unacceptably high rates of suicide among young people, carnage on our roads, criminality, sexual deviance, a loss of reference points in the wake of the decline in religious practice. The positive effects would be perhaps greater disposable income, cheap foreign travel, more enlightened attitudes towards sexuality, heightened levels of freedom, better access to education, more tolerance of difference. It is probably fair to say that on balance most people are better off than they were a few decades ago.

John McGahern was certainly of that view. Living as a young person in Leitrim and Roscommon, he would have seen a huge number of his contemporaries being forced to emigrate to find work. Many never returned. He was also the victim of clerical interference when he lost his job as a primary school in Clontarf after the banning of his second novel, *The Dark*, in 1965. The then Archbishop of Dublin, John Charles McQuaid, used his influence with the INTO to ensure that McGahern be removed from his position. The fact that he had got married in a registry office in London to a Finnish woman, Annikki Laaksi, the previous summer, did nothing to improve his standing with the Church. As someone whose life was negatively influenced by the Catholic Establishment, one might expect McGahern to have harboured hostility towards the Church. But remarkably that was not the case. Thus we read at the end of *Memoir*:

I have affection still and gratitude for my upbringing in the Church: it was the sacred weather of my early life, and I could no more turn against it than I could turn on any deep part of myself. (*Memoir*, p 222)

McGahern is not alone in retaining affection for the Church's role in introducing him to mystery and a sense of the sacred. While he remained staunchly an unbeliever, he nevertheless appreciated the sincere faith of his mother and recognised that for people like her – and they were numerous – the Church was the

most important influence in their sometimes harsh existence. McGahern is representative of a generation of Irish people who, while they were no longer formally members of the Catholic Church, still retained a respect, even nostalgia, for the symbolism of the religious ceremonies of their youth. But there is a lot in McGahern that reminds me of Sullivan and it is to this parallel that I now turn in comparing two very different, yet similar, autobiographical accounts, *Anticipate Every Goodbye* and *Memoir*. These books provide evidence of much common ground in terms of religious practice in Brittany and rural Ireland. Sullivan, while he was describing his youth and early adulthood from the First World War until the death of his mother in the 1960s, comes up with comments like the following, which are so appropriate to the Ireland described by John McGahern:

The priests at this time tended to preach about laws and obligations. In this way, they had succeeded in transforming Christianity into something approaching a natural religion. In their eyes the rural order in which the Church still played a dominant role was an expression of the divine will. They had forgotten about freedom, without which there is no real faith. (*Anticipate*, p 52)

McGahern resented the authoritarian nature of religion as it was enforced during the Ireland of his youth. He believed that Church and State worked hand in hand to ensure the preservation of a conservative, traditional way of life, free from what they considered the corrupt influences of continental Europe. Women were given a particularly raw deal in this society: they were usually forced to give up work when they got married and were denied access to artificial contraception, which would have allowed them control over the number of children they conceived. But there were even more sinister practices: 'The breaking of pelvic bones took place in hospitals because it was thought to be more in conformity with Catholic teaching than Caesarean section, presumably because it was considered more "natural".' (*Memoir*, p 210) What is striking about both writers' accounts is the extent to which their devout mothers completely accepted the authority of priests. In the case of Margaret McGahern, this blind acceptance could be said to have cost her

her life. After undergoing a mastectomy, the consultant strongly advised her and her husband that another pregnancy could prove fatal. McGahern was amazed to discover through letters exchanged between the couple that they were still risking intercourse in spite of the dire and well-founded warnings of the consultant. But when one considers the deep religious belief of this woman, and how closely linked this was to her role as dutiful wife, such an attitude is more understandable. Hence these sentiments in a letter she wrote to her husband: 'God has given me near-perfect health for forty years and now that he has taken that health away, it must be for some inscrutable reason of His own to test my faith. In Him and by Him and for Him I live and place my trust, and to Him alone I pray.' (*Memoir*, p 47) Such a strong faith allowed her to face up to her imminent death with equanimity, but it also left a large family without a mother and in the care of an extremely tough and authoritarian father:

He was religious too, but his religion was of outward show, of pomp and power, edicts and strictures, enforcements and all the exactions they demanded. In his shining uniform he always walked with slow steps to the head of the Church to kneel in the front seat. She [McGahern's mother] would slip quietly into one of the seats at the back. (*Memoir*, p 47)

Because of his stern exterior and noble bearing, Frank McGahern reminded his son at times of God the Father. Sullivan lost his father at the front in Argonne during the Great War when he was only a baby. His mother, in order to hold on to the farm she leased from a local doctor, was forced to remarry. This event had a traumatic effect on her son. He deliberately ran off prior to the wedding ceremony and was found in the woods by a neighbour, who dragged him back to the reception. As he approached the table, he noticed his mother looking at him with eyes filled with tears. He spoke of the impact of this event in an interview with Bernard Feuillet:

There is always one image that comes back to me. Crying, I run on a pathway through the fields. Why am I late? I have no idea. I arrive at the house – it's my mother's wedding. She isn't dressed in white as it's her second time to get married.

She is also crying as she comes over to me [...] My writing has been a constant attempt to cure myself of this scene. The death of my father, the remarriage of my mother have marked my whole life.¹²

Writing became a form of therapy for Sullivan – it operated in much the same way for McGahern. As an adult, he would realise that his mother was forced by economic necessity to remarry, but for the little boy dressed in the sailor suit that was reserved for special occasions, the sight of his mother giving herself to a man who was not his father was a cruel psychological blow. *Anticipate Every Goodbye* concentrates almost exclusively on the relationship between the mother and the only son of her first marriage. The children of the second union are barely mentioned, in the same way as the stepfather is only alluded to briefly, as Sullivan attempts to come to terms with the most important relationship in his life. In the same way, McGahern seems to have jealously cherished the time he spent alone with his mother. Sullivan had the advantage of resolving some of the pain he endured during his weekly Sunday visits to his mother, living alone now in Montauban-de-Bretagne – McGahern would not have the same opportunity, as his mother died when he was ten years old.

Anticipate Every Goodbye begins as the priest is driving down from Rennes to see his mother, now in her seventies. He turns the corner and the village of Montauban comes into view, with its familiar Breton landscape. His mind then jumps forward to the mother's funeral, when he, as the eldest child, will walk at the front of the cortège. Some day he knows she will not be there to greet him, a thought that fills him with anguish. As he arrives at the house, he can make out with relief his mother's shadow moving about in the house. They are not demonstrative in their affections towards each other:

I kiss my mother at the root of her hair. I will kiss her like this on her deathbed. She won't return my kiss, no more than she does now; that is the custom we have adopted. Everything takes place on the inside. (*Anticipate*, p 10)

12. *L'instant, l'éternité* : Bernard Feuillet interroge Jean Sullivan (Paris: Le Centurion, 1978), p 36. My translation.

The restraint in the writing does not disguise the depth of the feelings these two people have for one another. It was she who read the Bible aloud to him on a daily basis, she who inculcated him with her own strong faith. It was thus in the natural order of things that he should be the best in his class at catechism, his mother obliging him to reel off both the answers and the explanations! His decision to go to Junior Seminary was equally greeted with great joy – it was the fulfilment of a long-held maternal desire. John McGahern's mother made him promise regularly that he would become a priest:

After the Ordination Mass, I would place my freshly anointed hands in blessing on my mother's head. We'd live together in the priest's house and she'd attend each morning Mass and take communion from my hands. When she died, I'd include her in all the Masses that I'd say until we were united in the joy of heaven, when time would cease as we were gathered into the mind of God. (*Memoir*, p 63)

As can so often be the case, the vocation was more the mother's than the son's and soon literature replaced the priesthood as McGahern's vocation in life: 'Instead of being a priest of God, I would be the god of a small, vivid world.' (*Memoir*, p 205) Art fulfilled the role of religion in the writer's life as soon as he discovered that he no longer had the faith that his mother had attempted to pass on to him. He began to see how writing was his way of working out the complex tissue that constitutes human existence. Through 'naming' his world, through bringing it to life in words, he was, in a way, performing a divine function. Sullivan's mother often asked him why he wrote and he would have loved to explain to her that he did so in order to find himself, to find God who is already found, but never really found, in order to discover a hidden path: 'Writing, it seemed to me, limited my chances of telling lies.' Later, in the same page, he states: 'I'd express myself, and by extension the faith that was peculiar to me while hoping not to betray anything: such was my manifest ambition.' (*Anticipate*, p 79)

The death of their mothers impacted harshly on both writers. The rupture of the loss of someone so dear is related with a rawness that conveys the full anguish of the writers. McGahern, al-

though urged by his mother to pray for his father and sisters, always made the same wish, 'that she would never go away again and be with me forever.' (*Memoir*, p 75) On receiving the dreaded news that his mother had taken ill, Sullivan had a similar reaction: 'Forms and sounds became dim, the countryside was shifting uncontrollably. Love was like death; I had never known up until then what it was like to fall into nothingness.' (*Anticipate*, p 93) Although he was in a position, unlike McGahern, to say Mass for his mother, when she finally passed away he was so bereft he could not even concelebrate the funeral Mass. Once more, we come across the cathartic power of literature for Sullivan, as the writer assumes the function of the priest in his hour of need: 'You are not present at your own death. But it is impossible to escape from the death of someone you love. When you write, you love once more, suffer the pain all over again.' (*Anticipate*, p 104)

McGahern was not allowed by his father to attend his mother's funeral and he was forced to conjure up in his mind's eye the various stages of the ceremony: 'The priests come through the altar gate to bless the coffin. An altar boy holds the vessel of holy water; another carries the smoking thurible, and yet another the small boat that holds the incense.' (*Memoir*, p 133) He then imagines the dull thud of the clay on her coffin and reproaches himself for not having spent all the time he could with her before they left in the lorry their father had sent to collect them and the furniture from the house in which their mother was dying and transport them to the barracks in Cootehall: 'If I could have that hour or hours out on the cinders by the lorry back, I could portion out the time so that I could lay eyes on her face from time to time and she would not be gone forever.' (*Memoir*, p 135)

In the hospital in Rennes, before she was moved to Nantes, Sullivan first noticed the fault lines beginning to appear in his mother's faith and it hit home to him how difficult it is to die: 'Only at that precise moment did I know that she was going to die, that she was replacing Christ on the naked cross, experiencing all the feelings of abandonment. I could see her eyes - I couldn't, I wouldn't read what they were saying. I would only know later.' (*Anticipate*, p 111) To her son's amazement, she refused to pick up the rosary beads that never left her side

throughout her life; when he mentioned that she might like to invoke Our Lady of Lourdes, to whom she had great devotion, she shook her head. But he was also aware that 'in the unseen part of her soul she was still attached to the living and true God.' (*Anticipate*, pp 110-111) As the initial hopes of her recovery disappeared, the consultant told Sullivan that there was nothing further they could do for her, other than to allow her to die in her own house. Shortly after they got her into the ambulance, she died. Hospital regulations would normally decree in such circumstances that the patient be brought back inside but the driver agreed to continue, provided they left her eyes open. As they drove along the country roads, the trees and the landscape were reflected in these eyes and gave the impression of a great peace that had been hard won. The son was far from such a state, however. For him, there was only the terrible knowledge that there would be no more Sunday visits, no more glimpses of her silhouette behind the curtains, no more discussions about his dead father, about religion and writing. The following lines have a particular relevance for contemporary Ireland:

We are all blind thinking that life consists of possessing material goods, holding on to this, then that, getting to know one thing, then another, trying desperately to ignore the fact that the whole process inevitably amounts to absolutely nothing. Life isn't just a game where you have to possess and know as many things as possible. Rather, it is about reducing yourself to zero, living in a new and more authentic way. (*Anticipate*, p 114)

In today's globalised world, economic concerns dominate our awareness and tend to occlude our spiritual growth. What McGahern and Sullivan manage to capture in their autobiographical accounts is that faith is much more than a collection of ideas, that it has really got to do with rebirth, with 'reducing yourself to zero', recognising the transience of the things of this world. After McGahern died in 2006, he had arranged for a traditional funeral Mass, concluding with a decade of the rosary at his graveside (he was laid to rest alongside his mother in the cemetery of Aughawillan). There was no death-bed reversion to the Catholic faith. No, the funeral was more a mark of respect for

his mother's deep faith, as well as for the customs of the local community. *Memoir* concludes with the following lines:

I would want no shadow to fall on her joy and deep trust in God. She would face no false reproaches. As we retraced our steps, I would pick for her the wild orchid and the wind-flower. (*Memoir*, p 272)

I trust that the relevance of Sullivan's writings to the Ireland in which we live is evident from this brief discussion. He shares with John McGahern a keen awareness of nature as well as an appreciation of the importance of local rituals and religious practices. Their mothers imparted something more important to them than social standing and material wealth: the two women demonstrated by their life and death that a belief system is vital in combating the vicissitudes of life. Both writers discovered also that literature was their method of dealing with the pain of loss. As Sullivan stated: 'Writing these anecdotes, expressing ordinary feelings, which quite possibly millions of people secretly feel after seeing their own mother dying, reassures me and comforts me a bit. It sometimes seems to me that my mother is the humble mother of a great number of people.' (*Anticipate*, p 124) The same can be said of Margaret McGahern, who in *Memoir* assumes many of the qualities of mothers all over the world. Strongly imbedded in the local, these women attain a universal significance through the moving portraits provided by their writer-sons.

I asked the question earlier if there were any prophets in present-day Ireland who could compare favourably with Jean Sullivan. McGahern, because he was an unbeliever, is undoubtedly quite different from the French priest-writer, although they share a number of similar interests. When looking within the confines of the Church in this country, the name of the Benedictine monk, Mark Patrick Hederman, is someone who has the philosophical knowledge, keen intelligence and independence of mind to be considered on a par with Sullivan. Having studied in Paris during the 1960s under Emmanuel Levinas, he was undoubtedly exposed to a very different world view to what would have existed in Ireland at that time. He wrote in his thought-provoking *Kissing The Dark*:

There are those who no longer believe in any God or any religion because of disappointment with the Churches or because of disillusionment caused by the scandalous and criminal behaviour being daily reported among so-called professional representatives of the clergy and the religious orders. Nothing of the sort should allow us to be deflected from our own particular journey, our own connection with the living God.¹³

Quotes like this one show Hederman to have the same ability to criticise the abuses of the institution while still remaining within its fold. Sullivan wrote, for example, in *Morning Light*: 'I see the Church detaching its members from structures of profit, conventional security, and mythologies of happiness in order to make them spiritual nomads, capable of commitment without illusion, always ready to absent themselves in order to go somewhere else, straining for the impossible and necessary.'¹⁴ It is not always easy for priests or religious to distance themselves from the party-line or clerical mindset. Sometimes they can lose sight of the enthusiasm and sincerity of their early vocation and content themselves with performing their priestly function in a desultory fashion. Similarly, many sincere Catholics can go about their lives without a thought for how far removed they are from the Gospel message of unconditional love. Sullivan was convinced that there was hope in the midst of despair and that the 'dechristianised' France in which he lived had the potential for rebirth and regeneration, albeit among the 'few' who were able to see beyond the faults and failings of the institution and devote time to modelling their lives on the example of Christ. In this way, his testimony is invaluable in the Ireland of the third millennium.

13. Mark Patrick Hederman, *Kissing the Dark: Connecting with the Unconscious* (Dublin: Veritas, 1999), p 160.

14. *Morning Light*, p 158.